THE BREAD LOAF JOURNAL

VOLUME IX | SUMMER 2023

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Opening remarks:

We arrived in a drizzle. The light, misty rain welcoming us to a cluster of yellow buildings amidst green mountains: our home for the next weeks. We thought the weather would be its usual summer pattern of warm, sunny days with possible showers or an occasional thunderstorm in the afternoons. No one expected the deluge.

Soon, the innocent drizzle turned to a week of rain, punctuated by thunderclaps and downpours. Followed by a blackout. The destruction was evident on a drive down 125: a house pushed 500 feet onto the road; hillsides caved in; guard rails clinging to eroded roadway edges. Elsewhere: flooded towns; extensive blackouts; destroyed homes.

Recovery is a slow journey. It requires resources, time, and, as shown in the pieces that follow, humanity. We hope you will join us on this journey toward renewal—the rainbow on the other side of a storm—through the works in this volume.

Katherine Welch, Coeditor

Ameliorate: A Vignette in Vocabulary

EMILY REYNOLDS | VERMONT

I remember when I met Ameliorate: I was eleven years old, sitting beside my younger brother in our Honda Odyssey, listening thoughtfully as my eyes traced the window's changing terrain. The periphery of Sin City faded into the slowly surfacing canyons, and my mom drove us on. It was a weekday and the empty roads contained only the white minivan which carried the entirety of our educational island. I only know it was a weekday because my father—whose career dictated our ever-changing geography, the topography of whatever I could see from my seat—was at work and, because it was a weekday, my entire homeschool, our unit of three, could hike Red Rock Canyon without crossing paths with an "actual" school.

My mom drove and deejayed the didactic soundtrack of the day: C.D.s containing SAT vocabulary, definitions, anecdotes, and mnemonics advertised as antidotes to their daunting acquisition. After every new word of the "Not Too Scary Vocabulary," my mom paused the audio, asked us to create a sentence, and waited patiently, word after word, until her eleven-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son could effectively utilize "arbitration" and the like, looping the lesson as required until we got it right.

Ameliorate, "to make better; improve," how do you do? What a friendly word. The recording suggested you think of a yummy meal and how that makes you feel. The food imagery resonated within our minds and bellies, so when Mom stopped the tape, we impeccably generated hypothetical cases with cure-alls of chocolate and chicken nuggets. Mom, satisfied by our winsome wordings, played the next word, her soft smile I could see from my backseat.

I imagine my mom smiled even when life was unkind to her. Mom was raised in the land of the free, too, where your zip code determines your future quality of success, but she was stuck in one of the lowest-ranking schools in one of the lowest-ranking states. "Em Eye *Ess Ess*"—And she'd been labeled as stupid from ages six to sixteen until the high school's new carpetbagging counselor determined she has a disability, dyslexia, but the late revelation that "you don't read so good" can't undo the damage to either identity or GPA.

Add that with her one bright spot in school, art class, where Mrs. Baker, bless her heart, was the only one who believed in her, the one teacher who told my mom she was not just good but great. And imagine her whiplash from only

feeling successful in her high school art class and deciding to major in art at college, but then failing to meet her art professors' expectations, going from "great" to not even graduating.

Oh, but mix in Mississippi's expectations of womanhood, that not only does it *not* matter that she dropped out of college, as the degree itself was merely decoration—no, a woman's priority is not to study and pursue what she loves but rather find a man to love, for she is to marry and procreate and tend to the home. Amen. And the man she chose chose a path that transplanted her from the Bible Belt to Reykjavík, with places and people she had never known.

But, then. Blend that, that loneliness, with us, her Creation, where her elation lies. Our birth was her rebirth, her commitment to give us what she didn't have. All in her smile was her love for us, for we are not just her babies but we too are constantly transplanted and we too know no one; her sense of unity from our family unit. A nomadic tribe annually navigating the US Interstate system; her determination to give us the education that she was denied; her love in learning again and facilitating our academic development; her appreciation that her children, not plagued like she had been, could enjoy catchy raps about multiplication, ballads belting the names of American states and their capitals, and amusing anecdotes for acquiring SAT vocabulary; and her pride in seeing her own Paradise created when we crooned the crowd favorites of "The Fifty States are Really Great" and "Let's Multiply by Two."

Ameliorate and the others of the day stayed with me, and I saw them often some years later. My brother and I rehearsed the syntactical dance with them all—Amity, Arcane, among other "A" words—until we mastered the connotation and S-V-O footwork, Mom encouraging us throughout it all. As I reflect now, seventeen years later, I reflect on the seed my mother planted within me. My love of learning, my life within words, and my lessons on "how to make better": I owe all to her.

TWO IMAGES

MERIWETHER JOYNER | VERMONT

come sluggishly walking back to me
like children gone out to play
who seeing the dusk set in too quick
believe the slowing of feet can
ebb the onslaught of time.

I call for them, beckoning their return to me.
measured, they begin to peak above the hill home –
fuzzy heads, then bodies, and finally feet:

1. the time we lay perpendicular
eye to eye, no points converging
but a hand outstretched
fingers lightly stroking forehead,
temple
tip of the ear
setting a strand back into place
again and again
a ritual prayer
a holding back of the tide
and mercifully again.

2. the time after
on top of the parking garage
when you sat on the ledge
and let me stand between your knees
all points touching
but hands
and let me pretend
that the tide had not yet come in
had not yet washed our sargassum selves
to sea.

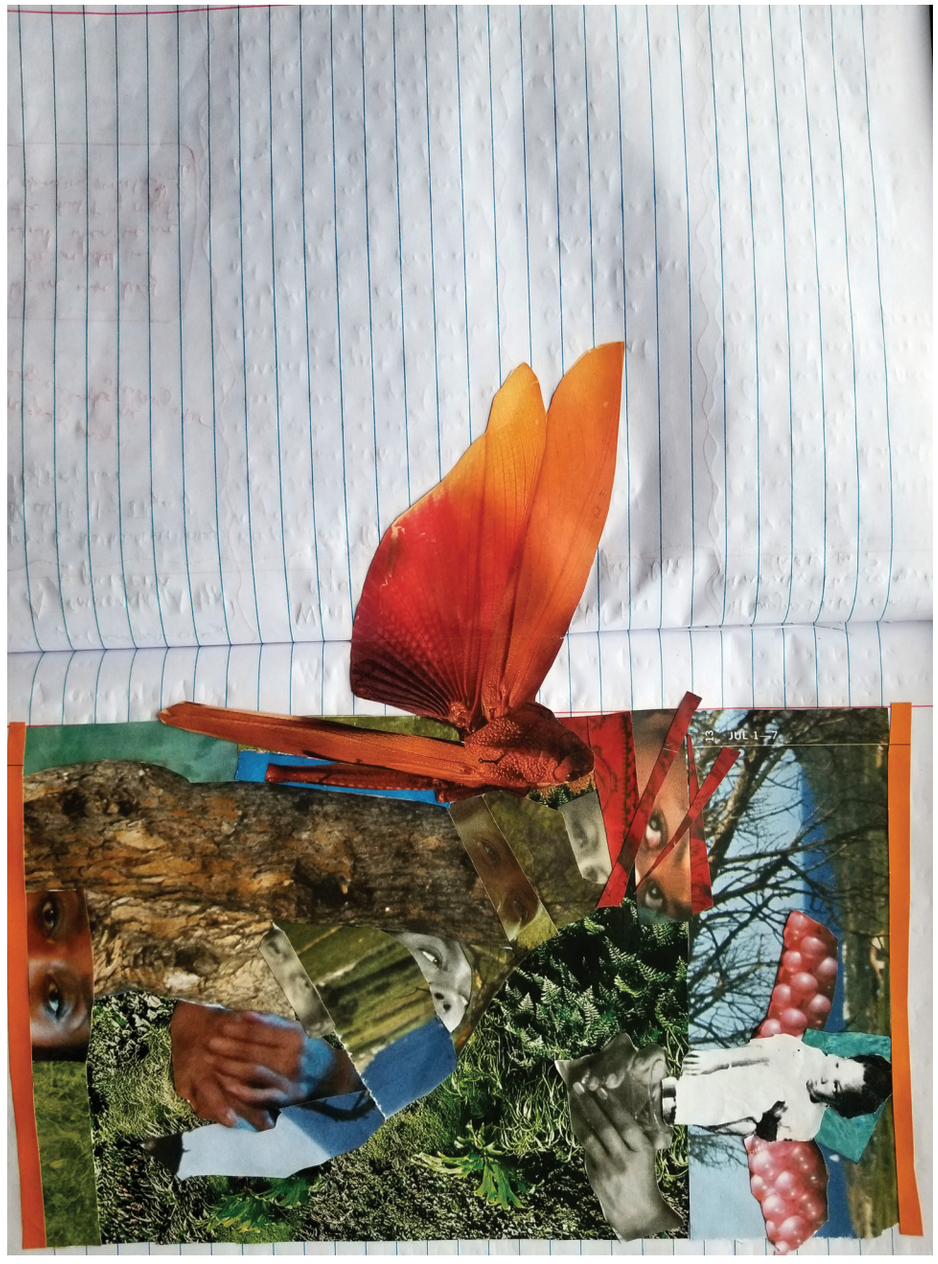
Landscape Study

COLIN BAUMGARTNER | VERMONT

What if we viewed others
the way we viewed the natural world?
If we began each day expecting, generally,
a gentle shift from dark to light and light to dark,
stillness shifting to animation and then stillness once more,
and otherwise left ourselves curiously open to everything between?
Might we then learn to handle the storms & thunder
by settling comfortably in & waiting for them to pass?
Delighting in the intensity and fervor of these times?
And might we then cherish the moment the sun,
following swiftly on the furtive scurrying clouds,
catches the sodden meadows
so that the world glistens
impossibly beautiful
because of that very storm?
How might we view the blanketing mists,
the obscuring fogs of life?
Might it be possible to view that veiling,
that distance, as a painter does?
As something alluring,
something heightening desire
—not quelling it?
Something we might lose ourselves in?
& be surrounded by?
What if we could accept that we cannot control,
cannot entirely comprehend,
and certainly cannot possess?
And instead, accepted things
just as they were—
In all their beauty
& their untamed disarray?

BAM! ("Quiet As It's Kept")

A. MARISA HARRIS | VERMONT



Sanctuary [after Allen, Texas, 2023]

TIMOTHY REE | CALIFORNIA

Moms
pops
in a mall
parking lot
I'm told
at a mall
mauled
by
pops
moms
in a mall
parking
gunned down
at a mall
maimed
in the lot
in the mouth
at the mall
mangled
jaws eye
sockets I was six
my brother
three
I'm told
at a mall
when guns
were still in
our thoughts
prayers
the pop
loud clink
off the hood
tight snare drum
of thoughts
prayers

paradiddle
rimshot double
offa car doors
the flam
ricochet into
my brother's left
temple
they said
we sang
in a temple
we wept
wailed
we crept
the aisle what else
but stare
the saints
in the stained
glass let us
rename
them
Cindy / Kyu Cho
my parents
swaddled child
in the middle
my brother James /
Daniela / Sophia
Mendoza /
Aishwarya
Thatikonda /
Elio Cumana-Rivas /
Christian LaCour
we say them
alive tonight
this sanctuary
listen now
the sea
the seagulls

sea lions
by the sea
a family
of seals
otters
a choir
of hunted fish
still rising to the moonlit surface.

Looking Homeward

KATHERINE WELCH | VERMONT

purple mountains' majesty
turned Aspen gold
in autumn when
Indian Paintbrush transforms
dried-out pine needles and wet pinecones
brilliant Coyote red

sun-warmed Evergreen boughs
give the hiker one last breath
of wild honey warmth
before an icy winter consumes
Seal, Devil's Thumb, and Goose
In a layer of powder

somewhere down below
the ice melt changes
to Columbine tears
as you stand
outside King Soopers
heart pounding, lungs screaming
mourning

Push that bouquet
through the metal links.
Breathe again. Heal.

Remember Columbine
blooms
amidst rocky adversity.

Safe and Alone

MICHELLE WNUK | VERMONT

In the gape of
your neck
I rest
my head
finally at peace
safe and alone
with you.

You wiggle
and giggle
and thrash your arms
moving into just the right
position with me
wrapped around.

My fingers
find the dip
in the center
of your chest
and lay my
hand to rest.

Away from the world
with its Hate
and Guns
we bask in the moment
when you're not afraid
while I'm at work
and I'm not afraid
while you're out for a run.

Interval

ETHAN MCBEE | VERMONT

On the third day the flesh will rise from your shins
But it will float back down again.
Rest must be handled with caution
A day or two more will dilute it enough
Drink deeply
The taste of blood won't last forever.

If you get dressed, you will get out the door.
If you get out the door, you will get down the road.
If you keep breathing, you should get back.

Put distance between yourself
And the
Mirror and scale,
Breakup and
Collections in the mail,
Old jeans and diagnoses.

But save something for the return leg.
This will always be reprieve, never escape.

Genesis

ANNA RUSSELL THORNTON | OXFORD

Feet beat on boards limbs
Break at joints hips swirl like tongues
Lapping up your shape

Black curls catch fingers
Like corkscrews latch clasp-clutching
Art unbottling

If I could, I would
Crawl inside your skin and live
Behind your ribcage

Second Skin

KATHARINE IZARD | VERMONT

I feel more comfortable in my second skin
The one you call dirt

I call it earth

I love the feel of the earth, smearing it along my body

Through the earth I can feel my mother and the mothers who came before her
The women I know, the women I still have yet to learn about
They also made a second skin of earth

Without the earth we are

Naked
The earth is our protector
The moisture that gives us strength

I have a tendency now to feel my anger
I don't bury it beneath the earth anymore
I light it on fire
I'm getting comfortable with the burn
Feeling it coat my muscles, wrapping me securely

Red is the color of my earth
Now it's the color of my fire too
And I'm ready for the next journey

Evening Songs

MARSHA HAWKINS | OXFORD

I called it Evening Songs.
Flour dusted the screen where it belonged.
Nothing in common, nothing really to stay,
just something easy while closing the day.
Fresh musical accompaniment to a well-worn routine,
a quick scroll, sixteen songs, each a check in green.

Tunes float gently. Above the stove, a whirring fan.
Kids coming home. Dogs beg for sup, dinner is the plan.
Satisfaction settles deeply.
Love at home and work, a guarantee.

I was turned, naked, focused on my garden,
nourishing, harvesting, as I had always done.
Hands worn from the years of it. A heavy confidence, a knowing,
you came behind, pointed at weeds kept at bay, not showing.
You fingered my slipped foundation and pried it open,
I dove between the cracks, a crumbling unspoken.

My garden wilted, the soft grass turned prickly.
I crawled out, left what I loved dearly.
I crawled, then I walked and I walked some more,
I didn't stop, I walked more than ever before.
Tears streamed down my cheeks, watering my tread.
The Earth below drinking them instead.

To breathe through my pain,
I take my phone, press play on what remained.

It was called Evening Songs.
Grime dusted the screen where it belonged.
Nothing in common really, nothing I meant to stay,
just looking for something to keep the pain at bay,
Well-worn musical accompaniment to my sacred steps,
A quick scroll, sixteen songs downloaded, nothing complex.

Tunes float gently. Shepherds call their sheep.
Briars line the road, field swallows warble and cheep.
I begin to sing, too. Then with feeling, I tap my toe.
The familiar scent of satisfaction tickles my nose.

I was bent and turned, focused on my pain.
Watching and watering and harvesting my shame.
Feet worn from the days of it. A heavy step, a suffering.
My stride tilled your words, left seeds of rediscovering.
I gathered my pieces along the way,
a bit worn but sturdy, rebuilt with stronger clay.

I put myself together, crawled out from under your weight,
then I placed my fingers on the latch and opened the gate.

what is on the other side of a black hole?

ELIZABETH SCHWARCZ | VERMONT

we ask where wormholes (theoretical)
usher
yet assume black holes
born of the greatest astounding reverberating deaths
ripping open the fabric of reality
(threads so breakable
what woven thing is
r e a l i t y)
is unexistence

those shining bursts of violence
colliding molecules giving last breaths to pure destruction
rebirth resumption reforging
giving life and screaming so hotly into the universe
are our consistence
infinite galactic systems built of
solar

why could not
that which entropy's terriblest labor brings
inkiest gateways open to all
be guide to inestimable newness

this world (planet, not whatever pittance humanity built)
will end in cracking collision with our dearest Andromeda
or inexorable pull to our seductive void center

why assume
(you know what happens when you assume)

what awaits
could not be
renewal

One more delight and I'll spill over

JENNA RUSSELL | OXFORD

I can only take in so much wonder. There's enough of it in one square inch of dark green moss, on one grey shingle of a rooftop, seen through this one open window, to last me a whole day. And if I look at it in the spreading light of dawn, or the retreating pink of dusk? Forget about it. Add one chirping bird or ringing church bell and I'll need to lie down for 15 minutes to regain my composure. You can't take me anywhere. Especially not a museum. I'll look at one stupid pottery shard from nowhere-village for an hour. I'm intolerable.

"You don't seem all that excited about England," a friend remarked some days before my flight. I tried to explain. "It's just that I don't *need* all of it, you know? It's like taking cough medicine when you're perfectly healthy. Makes me feel ungrateful, like I don't deserve all this splendor. All the cathedrals and first folios and ancient libraries... it was enough for me to be here, today, in your kitchen, drinking ice water out of this mason jar that's so big I have to hold it with both hands. You know what I mean?" He didn't. That's fair. I didn't articulate it very well.

That's how gratitude is with me. A little goes a long way. One kernel of awe can last me years. Nonperishable. Once, in an undergrad theater class where I was a completely unwanted outsider as the only non-theater-major in the bunch, a boy grabbed my hand during a physical group warm-up, and ran his thumb over mine, soft but deliberate. Just once. It was enough. Like he'd cured me of leprosy. That singular swipe of a thumb rescued me so utterly that I am still writing about it eight years later.

Once in my childhood my family took a trip to our tiny cabin, shared between seven sets of auntanduncles. While the family bustled about changing into swimsuits and sunscreen for the beach, I became fixated on a small framed photo on an end table, of all my cousins and me at Christmastime. I picked it up. My eyes scanned that picture as if they would 3D print it, one pixel at a time. Every detail - the red velvet of my dress, the green plaid of my sister's, the deer antlers on the wall, my open mouth, the way my small hand pawed nervously at a locket around my neck. 45 minutes later, my mom broke me out of my reverie. "I thought you were reading or taking a nap or something. Have you just been staring at that picture this whole time?"

Yesterday on the bus my friend pulled out a sketchbook and instantly, expertly rendered in pen the stranger sitting in front of us - the way her

straight hair fell across the seat, her posture, the way she gripped her phone. It took my friend maybe three minutes to draw her, and I nearly had to choke down tears. “She doesn’t even know that she’s going to be immortal,” I thought. “She’s just sitting there, doing nothing special, and my friend looked at her closely enough to commit her to paper forever.”

Anyway, it’s little miracles like that. It’s cottonwood season arriving in Michigan. It’s fumbling terribly through a line dance at Coyote Joe’s until the cowboy-hatted instructor murmurs to you, smiling, “There, now you got it.” It’s doing a triumphant karaoke number in Vermont and someone texting someone else a video of you, captioned “This girl just burnt down the barn.” It’s a drunk friend kissing you clumsily on the top of your head. It’s your sister making you watch all eight hours of Angels in America with her, huddled around her laptop on the floor on New Year’s Eve. It’s your students having a snowball fight in the parking lot after their final rehearsal for the fall play. It’s the things you keep coming back to look at. The things you look at enough to put on paper. You have to put them there because otherwise they keep welling up in you like water, and your socks keep getting wet.

I’m grasping at a thesis here. I think it’s sort of an instruction manual. For how to find a soulmate every five minutes. In the girl who adjusted your hat for you. In the classmate who described the feeling of watching a particular musical for the first time as “being sucked into a black hole.” In the employee at the sandwich shop who gave you your food for free. In whoever scratched their initials into that tree, whoever checked out this library book before you, whoever that is currently singing a beautiful off-key cover of a Whitney song at the pub down the street. I’m so grateful I’m nauseous. Told you I’m insufferable. Please forgive me for it, and for any earnestness that comes off like pretension. I’m attempting to make up for lost time.

how I became a mother

CAITLIN T. D. ROBINSON | OXFORD

is it because I’m a Gemini I learned
Mom-love first in Sorrow Joy later

You both made me. One here, breathing
the other far from us, Loving

I’ve always seen both sides of the wave
as it folds under the sun unrelenting

felt the befuddlement of kelpy strands
the wonder-worry of their open fingers

plucked up toes from barnacled bottoms
learned to tread tread early taught limbs

lean into the cycle make inconsistent circles
lift chin to the sun hold the waves’ sway sway

Mother Triptych

ANNA RUSSELL THORNTON | OXFORD

ways in which I am like your mother
green thumb (dubious)
"everyone loved her" (I guess)
writer (that one's true)

ways in which you are like breathing
you write my body
and are writing still even as
I write myself now

alternatively
you write my body
over my body, have you
even seen my body?

ways in which you are my mother
each house I've lived in
has drawerfuls of hand-written
letters from you

hellokitty55 a ten-minute play

MISAO MCGREGOR | VERMONT

CHARACTERS

KIMI Female. Early 20s. Japanese American. An annoyingly early-career, vivacious but impatient, artist. Ari's sister.

ARI Female. Late 20s. Japanese American. A gay lawyer who loves her mother's ozoni (traditional Japanese New Year soup). Kimi's sister.

Kimi sits in her room, watching the screen of her laptop. She wears big glasses that keep sliding down her face as she furiously shoves them back up the bridge of her nose. A knock on the door.

ARI *(Offstage)*
Kimi! Mom's setting the ozoni—get down here! /

KIMI Just a minute! /

ARI Kimi.

Beat. Ari knocks on the door again.

KIMI I said just a second! /

ARI You better not be on your computer /
Ari hits the door.

KIMI I'm not on my computer —

Kimi types.

ARI I hear typing!! /

KIMI It's nothing! I—sneezed! Achooo! /

ARI So your nasal passage sounds like a keyboard now? /

KIMI My nasal passages are fine, thank you! /

ARI You're the worst liar /

KIMI Maybe that's cause I'm not lying—yesss!!!

ARI That's it, I'm coming in!

Ari shoves the door open and sees Kimi glued to her laptop.

ARI (Con't)
Kimi! We said no technology while we were here at mom and dad's /

KIMI I know I know, but look!!

Kimi shoves the laptop in Ari's face.

ARI What am I looking at? /

KIMI Read it /

ARI Read what? /

KIMI Right there, under the /

ARI What—here? /

KIMI Yeah, right /

ARI Oh, here? /

KIMI Oh my god—are you sure you're a lawyer because you're useless /

ARI Who's hellokitty55?

KIMI Hellokitty55 is the first user at the top of the entire list of people who are all of my customers!

ARI Customers for what? /

KIMI For the giveaway I'm doing! /

ARI For your art thing? /

KIMI For my Art Account on Instagram where I can showcase my art without having to suck a bunch of dicks to get into a gallery, yes my art thing! Don't you listen to anything I say? /

ARI Ewww, not when you talk about dicks, that's gross /

KIMI Can you not shit on the exact thing I'm trying to accomplish with my life? /

ARI I was not shitting on your art, I was shitting on the dicks /

KIMI God, do you have to remind us you're gay every holiday season? /

ARI Well considering most of our extended family forgets every year, yes I do.

They laugh.

ARI (Con't) Ok but why do you have to look at your computer now? /

KIMI Because the giveaway was supposed to end at midnight -- you know, New Year's Eve? /

ARI Ah yes, the drunken mess you've always been butt hurt about missing /

KIMI Well, it's not fair we've never gotten to do a New Year's Eve celebration! There's always too much to do on New Year's Day /

ARI Yeah, that's the point of Japanese New Year. The *first* day of the *New* Year /

KIMI Ok, hi, I didn't ask for an explanation of our family traditions /

ARI Can you just hurry up so we can eat mom's ozoni? You know I look forward to this every year /

KIMI Fine, but I just wanted to see how many other submissions I got after we fell asleep last night /

ARI You think people ordered your art in the middle of getting drunk and watching a ball drop onto a building with confetti in the air? God white people are so weird /

KIMI Can you just let me have this moment to welcome in the New Year with a positive reinforcement of what I'm deciding to do with my life?

ARI Fine. But I'm starting my year off hungry thanks to you /

Kimi squeals and scours through her computer.

KIMI Oh my god. There's like twenty in here!

ARI That's great. Can we eat? /

KIMI I just want to take a quick look at the /

ARI Oh my god, Kimi /

KIMI Oh wait, no, that's—maybe this one /

ARI Now what? /

KIMI Just give me a second I'm trying to /

ARI Are you looking at every single one now? /

KIMI God you have no patience /

ARI Not when it comes to ozoni, it's the greatest soup in the whole world and mom doesn't have a recipe written down so whenever I try to duplicate it it's just wrong and if you want to talk about welcoming in the New Year on a good note then it's pretty magical to eat the world's greatest soup on the first day of the New Year and why are you crying?

A tear streams down Kimi's face.

KIMI It's nothing.

ARI What happened? /

KIMI Nothing, I'm ready to eat now /

ARI Kimi.

Beat.

KIMI All the messages I got are just from other Instagram users trying to get follow back's for their page. Only hellokitty55 was a real customer, I think. But the rest aren't even interested in my art, they just want another like or share or something.

ARI Oh. *Silence.*

KIMI I know you think it's stupid /

ARI Well isn't it? /

KIMI Look, just because you think you're above the whole world of social media doesn't mean that it doesn't affect other people. I mean, there are studies coming out saying that your self esteem can either soar or plummet depending on how many likes you get or how many followers you have /

ARI I know, that's exactly why I don't use it /

KIMI But what about being able to make a difference?

ARI What do you mean?

KIMI It's like social media is this incredible tool that gives people a platform or at least a chance to showcase who they are, what they're doing, what they want to do without years and years of going to school and being in debt for finally being recognized for their efforts /

ARI And there are plenty of people who feel broken at the end of the day just because someone they don't know decided to unfollow them. Look, I do support your art. But I just don't know why you expect the world's recognition so quickly. Hard work does pay off /

KIMI I am working hard. It just seems like . . . so many things go viral and why can't I? /

ARI Is there even an exact statistic about things going viral on the internet? /

KIMI I don't know but . . . just nevermind . . .

Beat.

ARI You know what could help?

KIMI What?

ARI Mom's ozoni /

KIMI You're relentless /

ARI For that soup I will do anything.

KIMI Then you go down without me.

ARI Why? /

KIMI Just tell them I'm not feeling well /

ARI But you're fine /

KIMI No, I'm not /

ARI It's just a stupid app /

KIMI I don't want to have to talk about it with mom and dad! /

ARI Then don't talk about it /

KIMI I can't hide my emotions like you!

ARI It could do you a bit of good /

KIMI Said the lawyer to the artist /

ARI What are you so afraid of?

Beat.

KIMI Do you think it was the best day of Mom and Dad's lives when I came home and decided to be an Art Major? Do you think they thought to themselves, "Thank God we crossed an ocean to give our children a better life so one daughter could go to law school and the other one could paint some pictures and shit"

ARI You have to stop comparing the two of us /

KIMI *They* don't! /

ARI Kimi, mom and dad are so much more open than you give them credit for /

KIMI With *you!* I just . . . I just want them to be proud of me.

ARI They are.

KIMI Sometimes I'm not so sure.

Beat.

ARI So you're going to miss New Year's with our parents because only one person ordered an art piece for your giveaway.

KIMI There were no orders, I told you it was just a bunch of Instagram rando's.

ARI And what about hellokitty55? /

KIMI What *about* hellokitty55? It could be a spam account for all I know.

Beat. Ari goes to the door and stops.

ARI Hellokitty55 is waiting for you downstairs. With her ozoni. Mom asked me to help her make an account so she could see all the stuff you're putting online.

KIMI What?

ARI You're right that mom and dad don't really know how to talk to you. You're a lot more American than anyone else in our family because you're the youngest. But that doesn't mean that they don't love you. They just don't know how to show their emotions the same way you do. But they love you so much. We all do.

Beat. Kimi embraces Ari, an unfamiliar touch between the sisters, but they gradually settle into the affection. Still in the hug, Kimi speaks.

KIMI You remember that one year you couldn't make it back for New Year's?

ARI When I was studying for the LSATs? Yeah, that was miserable.

KIMI Yeah . . . Mom taught me how to make ozoni that year.

Ari gasps and they pull apart.

ARI You've known the recipe this whole time?!

KIMI Race you downstairs to the greatest soup in the world!!

They dart out competitively.

End of play.

No Ideas But in Things

ETHAN MCBEE | VERMONT

I was almost certain the used-to-be-red wheelbarrow will outlive the used-to-be-middle-aged man pushing it. It has already laid waste to the better part of two generations, and the worst-case scenario in me fears it might take out two more today.

But the rusty relic bears a charmed life and it isn't going to break just yet.

My great-grandfather commissioned the wheelbarrow out of Pennsylvania chestnuts and Great Lakes steel. His son used it to build the first house this side of Swan Creek. That man's son used it to forge a bike trail through what's now three separate backyards. I hauled off the last of the ash trees in it. And now my son is using it as a racecar.

After the third lap, I can put down the camera and breathe. My fears evaporate into my grandfather's labored laughter, echoed in the squeals of his own great-grandchild sitting below him.

"I think I still got it. You think he had fun?"

The eighty-year-old man still moves as fluidly as I remember. Lucky genes and a love of tennis somehow beat back chain smoking through Vietnam and a lifetime in the American healthcare system.

Inside, I fetch what college kids call "the Beast." Though, Grandpa always refers to them as "sandwiches in a can." The minifridge, whose wooden handles I notice for the first time, only has two left. The old man rationed perfectly.

"You remember when I used to push you around in this thing?"

Today I remember everything.

We close up the house: emptied of everything except the furniture the new family permitted to stay and the ghosts we try to leave behind. The last house my grandfather will know. The last place that's been with me since the start. The first home my son will forget.

Between the size, the rust, and the weight, the wheelbarrow is sure to ruin the upholstery and exacerbate my shedless suburban storage. We push anyway. It won't fit. I can't bring myself to put it on the side of the road.

I've put it down here instead.

The Custodian

LAN KAO | VERMONT

On Monday morning, Mr. Pham pulls into the employee parking lot at McNamara Elementary School in his 1995 Toyota Camry. He is the first one there. The driver's side door creaks open and he steps out in a faded black T-shirt that says *MCNAMARA TIGERS* across the chest, tucked into his blue jeans and a brown belt to keep it all together.

The sun begins to peek over the edge of the trees far in the horizon, and Mr. Pham makes his way to the back entrance of the school building. Inside, he takes out a large ring of keys, and his gaze lingers for a moment on the leathery brownness of his hands, the purplish veins running across them, a contrast to the still-shiny gold watch on his wrist, and he begins turning on the lights. He walks briskly, purposefully, down the hallway, turning on lights down each perpendicular hall, his large lunchbox gently bumping his hip as it has done every school day for the last three years.

By the time the faculty, staff, and students arrive, the building has woken up from its slumber and is alive with the hum of air conditioning. The children can be heard on the playground, chattering and laughing and greeting each other as though it has been months, not days, since they last saw one another. The clicks and thuds of doors opening and shutting begins as faculty return to their classrooms for a new day. Mr. Pham smiles at the familiar sounds.

***

He is twenty-five again, no salt in his hair, staring at the blackboard, lightly tossing up and catching the chalk in one hand while the other hand sits on his hip. The seats are still empty, and the only other sounds are those of his colleagues in their offices, but the students will be coming soon, ready to practice the multiplication they learned last week.

He starts to write the equations on the board, the *click-clack-click-clack* of chalk on the blackboard filling the room. After a few minutes, he finishes and sets the chalk down on the ledge of the board and wipes his hands, not yet leathery with work and age, careful not to get any dust on his freshly ironed black slacks. He pulls down on the sleeves of his crisp, white button-up, partially covering the gold watch on his wrist, and steps out into the hallway to welcome the bustling group of children.

***

The bell rings for the "big kids'" lunchtime, and Mr. Pham steps to the side as the doors open. From each doorway, a line of twenty-five students of varying heights walks out, an index finger over their lips and lunch bags and boxes in tow. He smiles and nods at them as they walk by. Some wave back to him, others stare straight ahead, and others frown in his direction. Once they pass, he takes his mop back out of the bucket and cleans up an accident left by a kindergartener who had not made it to the restroom in time.

As soon as he puts up a "Wet Floor" sign, he hears over the loudspeaker: "Can I get a custodian to the cafeteria, please? Custodian to the cafeteria, please."

Of the three custodians there during the day, he is, at that moment, the closest to the cafeteria. He knows because Sandy is on her lunch break on the other side of the building and Miguel was just called to the gymnasium to clean up the mess made by a third-grader who had made himself dizzy spinning in circles and ended up showing everyone what he had for breakfast. So, after emptying the bucket into the drain in the custodial closet, he fills it up again, and heads to the cafeteria.

***

He is forty-five now, standing in the departure lobby of the Tan Nhat Son International Airport in Saigon. His face carries a mixture of pride and sadness as his young, bright-eyed nineteen-year-old son stands in front of a food vendor, lightly tossing up his keys in one hand while the other rests on his hip. He and his wife look down at the itinerary their son has had printed out for them–flight numbers, connections, and times, all leading to Long Beach, California, where he will earn a degree in mathematics in America.

"Don't worry, *Ba*, *Má*," the young man says on returning with a bag of chips. "I will call when I get there, and I will write often. And one day, I'll bring you to America, too!"

His father smiles, the crinkles around his eyes betraying his age, and he gently embraces his son, his only child, and pats him on the back. He reminds him that he has an entire school to run in their small town. A principal's job is never done, he says. The boy smiles back quietly and says he knows.

But his flight will be leaving soon, and he hugs his parents one last time before heading down to the security checkpoint. The hug is not long enough, so his parents hold each other as they watch their son go.

***

Mr. Pham arrives in the cafeteria, and most of the students are seated at the neat little tables with the small, round stools attached and they have begun eating, chatting quietly as the cafeteria monitor paces along the aisles. At the exit of the lunch line, someone has, it seems, dropped their tray and a cone is now detouring the students around the collage of mashed potatoes, green beans, and chicken nuggets.

He navigates quickly and easily through the lunchroom and rolls the industrial-sized mop and bucket to the scene of the incident, leaning the mop against the wall at just the right angle to keep it steady. He takes out a set of latex gloves from his back pocket, and, grabbing the dustpan, swiftly scoops up the evidence of the mess and dumps it into a nearby trash can. Within a minute, he has cleaned up the mess and set the bright orange safety cone on top of the wet spot and heads back to the custodial closet.

Before he makes it to the exit, however, a boy at the end of one of the tables–a fourth grader, Mr. Pham assumes by his relative size–spills his cup of peaches in the middle of telling a story about his dog, just missing Mr. Pham's shoes. The boy looks over at the new mess he has made, looks up at Mr. Pham, and goes back to telling his story.

"Jimmy, why did you do that?" his friend whispers, and glances to the end of the table to see if their teacher had noticed the scene, but Ms. Salazar is too busy telling Chris to take his straw out of his nose.

"It was an accident," Jimmy responds defensively.

"At least help him clean it up," his friend says.

By then, Mr. Pham has already begun cleaning up the mess.

"He's almost done anyway," Jimmy says not-so-quietly. "Besides, it's his job to clean up, not mine."

Mr. Pham pauses, his mop mid-swish, and catches Jimmy's eye. Jimmy fidgets and looks away. Mr. Pham finishes his task and leaves the lunchroom.

***

He is fifty-five as he reads the letter from his son. The son's wife is pregnant, and he wants his mother and father to come to America to be with the family.

"Your first grandchild!" he writes. "I know you are working hard at your school, but I want my son to know his grandparents. I've already started the paperwork to sponsor you to bring you to America. It will take some time, and I don't make a lot of money, but we will find a way. You just have to say yes.

Please say you and *Má* will come, *Ba*."

He leans back in his chair and looks at the filing cabinets and books and binders that he has accumulated over the years. Class photos cover the office walls, and on his desk sits a small photo of him, his wife, and his son at the airport the day his son first left for America. Five years passed before he had seen him again.

Since then, he has been begging his father to move to America, and each time, the old principal says he has to stay for the school, always for the school. Yet he is also afraid of what that unknown land would mean for him. His son had become a math teacher, and his wife a journalist, and the old principal knows the two of them would not be able to support all five of them. It's not a good idea.

He picks up the envelope and notices a photograph included. It is a photo of his son and his daughter-in-law in a garden, her hand cradling a swollen belly.

His first grandchild. Can he know his first grandchild from almost 8,000 miles away?

***

On Monday afternoon, at the last bell, the halls are clear, the students all on their way home. Mr. Pham makes one last lap in the lunchroom to make sure there are no leftover apple cores that escaped him the first time. He, Sandy, and Miguel always clean the lunchroom at the end of the day. They never say much to each other–between their Vietnamese, Chinese, and Spanish, they didn't always have the words–but they worked in comfortable silence, swiftly cleaning what they could before the night shift arrived.

He reaches for the ring of keys, turns off the cafeteria lights, and heads down the main hall to the front office. The receptionist looks up when he enters, and she smiles.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Pham," she says.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Garcia," he answers, the exchange familiar and comforting. "How do you do?"

"I'm doing very well, thank you." She turns around in her chair and looks at the ground behind her with a smile. "Chau, look who's here."

A child runs out from behind the reception desk, dragging an oversized but mostly empty backpack. He is followed by an older girl wearing a big grin. Both eagerly make their way into the open arms of Mr. Pham.

"*Ong noi, ong noi!*" Grandpa, grandpa! the little one cries joyfully, as if

he has not seen him in months, though he had only just seen him the night before.

"Hello, Chau, hello Thuy. Good day today?" he asks, moving his lunchbox behind him and offering his hands to them.

They nod and hold on tightly to their grandfather's rough but warm hands. "Very good!"

"Good," Mr. Pham says.

He walks back through the halls of the school building to the back entrance once more, listening to his grandchildren talk over each other as they share stories of recess and lunch and reading and numbers–and, oh, how they love numbers.

COLLECTING

MERIWETHER JOYNER | VERMONT

I've been reading the collection of poems
I made after I ended things again.

I never told you about it
I think you would have thought it strange.

my need to bind them up
to title it

to order our poems into a story
just as I was saying goodbye.

but i needed to be able to remember
like a mother returning

once a year to the chest that holds her child's
blanket, favorite stuffed animal,

the dress with the stain from that picnic
just to hold them a minute and know that it was real.

your poems are still my favorite—you have such a way with final lines.
I come back to the siren one more than the others

a thin, snaking composure—just a word or two on each line
a silhouette of me standing at the door. I hope you remember.

I never thought of myself as a siren,
never saw myself in that way.

And for as many times as I return to it,
I am never her.

But I am there in the poem;

I know this treachery of body all too well – this betrayal.

So maybe it will make sense to you if I say
our poems are my siren's song

and every now and again, all I ask is to be led to the rocks
to be drowned by them

to let them remind me I am alive
and that I will be washed ashore again.

Jakesong

TRISH DOUGHERTY | VERMONT

That Wednesday in July
we attained peak *Beowulf*.
Side by side in our own Heorot,
me with the fish and you
with the vegetarian, refilling
our comically-small water glasses.

Inflated by the articles we main-
lined, masters of our own little corners
of the text. Dropping plurilinear units,
sketching the larger rhetorical patterns
on napkins.

We snickered together on Francis's couch;
six of us jammed in his office passing
his treasures round like toys. Pints
at the campus bar, in old-timey pubs,
in London. Mead shots on the train
from Salisbury. Pimms on the quad.
We finally stopped at that tuck shop,
(the one with the gigantic lines),
after our last class. I had a panini.

And then it ended,
the rewrites all rewritten,
grades were given, flights were boarded.
Color me Aethelred, unready.

You're landlocked in Denver,
safe from Viking raids, but the miles between
us gape like a gigantic caesura.
I never caught the name of your girlfriend,
somebody's unnamed daughter.

I am holding on to your voice and smile Jake,
Happily forgetting every Saxon king
and all the Spear-Danes just to keep
you.

Talking about Tony

ANDREW MARCHESANI | VERMONT

G is all tongue, teeth, and smile.
Grilled chicken in both cheeks
        he forces out the words
                and bites the bite back in
as everything else spills out.

Handsomely dressed as ever
in a forest green overshirt,
        sunglasses inside,
but somehow not dickish.
How does he get his hair to do that?
If there is a prettier man,
        anywhere,
I haven't seen him.

At 19, when I saw him,
before I knew him,
or knew how to call him,
or knew what to do
with the fascination,
lust, and envy
that seeing him at the bus stop
stirred up in me,
I called him *flyboy*.

At 28, G is still fly.
In SLO for his stag,
he's surrounded by a
        gaggle of guys.
A captive audience
        for his guitar
        and his gab.
Right now it's the gab.

His right hand is wrapped tight
with duct tape,
covering a deep cut
on his palm.
He cut himself thirty minutes ago
decapitating a champagne bottle
with a butcher's knife.
Or was that yesterday?
It was only a flesh wound.
How many shroomed-up white boys
does it take
to treat a gash?
Together we rushed to the kitchen
of this prairie style rental home
to stem the bleeding,
to save our hero.

Now we're here at the table.
G weeps for the end of innocence.
He's talking about Tony.
G sees Tony the way I see G.
Parts Unknown, that Tony.
Not the *Roadrunner* Tony.
"They don't get to rewrite his life
in two hours
and make it all about addiction
and overdose
and suicidal thoughts.
I spent 10 years
and 100 hours with him.
That's not my Tony."

He's also talking about Stephen,
the brother who isn't here.

G forks in another bite,
and stands up
to give his third

or fourth
toast of the night.
This, despite
there only being five of us
left around the live-edge table.
"I feel so lucky to have met Jen",
YAYY!
"And all of you".
YAYY!
"And it makes me so happy to see all of you
here together...
If only Stephen could have been here too..."

He trails off and looks off,
eyes fixed on the bric-a-brac
behind me.
Raising our tiny, green, plastic shot glasses,
mine only half full,
we say "*Salud* ".

G sits down
to take another bite
from his magically refilling plate
and launches back into
talking about Tony.

Gravestone

JENNIFER CANTRELL | VERMONT

For William Stringham (1860–1897), buried in Galvin Cemetery in Ripton, Vermont

First line from Lucille Clifton's "won't you celebrate with me"

Won't you celebrate with me
my sharp angles of granite,

eroded words caressed
by the wind? I was put here

because stone is firmer than flesh
and has a longer memory.

Celebrate, too, the tree
bursting forth from my left side,

though it skews me
to an unnerving angle. That tree

cradles a skull in its roots, and what more
could one want for one's bones

than the embrace of a tree
and the testament of stone?

her heartbeat

CAITLIN T. D. ROBINSON | OXFORD

we heard it
as if someone
shouted joy! joy!
joy is here
now listen

of course we couldn't
do anything else
our jaws gaped
pulses raced
we sprung up
to match the pace
thump thump thump
emboldened by a beat
working hard
to be

as if she knew
it would stop
weeks later

won't you celebrate with me

KATHERINE WELCH | VERMONT

won't you celebrate with me
her homecoming
open arms welcoming
the return of the wanderer
after years of being away
she opened her eyes
and—for the first time—

saw.

Boyle Heights Isn't Built For Tow Trucks

ANDREW MARCHESANI | VERMONT

Boyle Heights isn't built for tow trucks, but the AAA man is insistent with his 24-point turn. You live on a narrow, crooked street. It's one of those Los Angeles hillside properties that appears to be nothing more than a garage next to a metal-gated door from the street level, but that sprawls into a multi-level affair when seen from the rear. I'm visiting for two weeks before heading to France. I don't want to think about saying goodbye, so I don't.

Your 2003 Honda Accord waits expectantly to get lifted. Sun, rust, ash, acid rain, earthquakes, the sub-prime mortgage crisis, and the Bush presidency have left it looking like a burnt marshmallow. Not golden brown—burnt to a crisp. You've told me it once was black. Back when it was your dad's car. He was the one who put the tint on all the windows. A real man of mystery.

It was your sister's car after that. Based on a mysterious clinking sound that comes from the trunk everytime you drive over a speed bump, you're convinced she forgot about some hidden bottle of vodka or a pack of warm beer.

Feeling antsy, I walk to the passenger side door and open it. I duck my head in and reach for my navy blue backpack on the floor. My phone is in the side pocket, meant for water bottles. I grab it, then notice the chapstick in the same pocket. I put some on, hoping that kisses are still in store for later in the day. Mwah. I duck out of the car and back out into the stupidly hot September sun.

You're talking animatedly with your dad on the phone. You always make fun of how much I talk with my hands, but you're doing it now. Where I do big sweeps, you do sharp chops. You need to get to the bottom of it. The alternator is fucked. Or maybe it is the carburetor. Or the flyingpurplepeopleeator. Something's fucked.

Our weekend is, for starters. Being stranded in Boyle Heights, with no ride, in the small room you rent at neurotic Gemma's house, where every kitchen appliance has a sticky note screaming what not to do, was not our idea of how our first anniversary would go. Our AirBnB in Malibu is sitting there all alone. Siren song across the hazy, smoky, sweaty expanse of the Los Angeles Basin. "Upstairs room with an ocean view". The room is probably wondering where we are. It needs our weight, your giggles, and my big hand gestures. Does the room know the Accord is fucked?

The Accord won't budge. It's fucked. The AAA man performs a strange and miraculous feat. Feet on the ground outside the car, door open, sweat pouring

down his neck, he inserts your key into a hidden key slot near the gear stick, and gives it a strong turn of the wrist. I'm not convinced he really needed to do that. But what do I know? It must have something to do with the immobilator.

Now he tells you to get in the car so you can steer it onto the truck. Not wanting to be outdone, I get in the passenger seat. You scowl at me, but I can tell you're starting to enjoy it. The AAA man hooks us up to his long tow cable and gets back in his truck. We hear it before we feel it. A whirring, groaning sound. "WWRROOAANNOOSSAAHH" Then we feel it. A tight tug below the navel. I look at you and I know you like it too. He waves a sweaty arm out of his window. You brace the steering wheel and pulse it 5 degrees either direction just to see what it does. It does nothing. But now we're climbing up the ramp. I say "WHEEE" and you look at me like I'm crazy, but there's laughter in your eyes and I want to touch you. The back wheels join the front wheels on the ramp now. We're really going somewhere.

The Accord rolls itself up the ramp and onto the bed of the tow truck. Big spoon, meet little spoon. It stops there and lays itself down to rest. I am sure we'll never see it again. But for now, it takes off on its way to Orange County. We wave goodbye and now you're really laughing. You call your dad back to say the Accord is en route. He has a car guy down there and AAA will tow up to 100 miles. Malibu is much nearer than that, but they have a policy not to tow humans.

I pull out my phone and order us an Uber. It's going to be Ubers all weekend. Thank God it's 2018 and their prices haven't gone up yet. Venture capitalists are still pouring money in to keep the price of each ride artificially low. It's good of them, really. If they didn't, LA would have way too many unsuicided taxi drivers.

Five minutes later, an uninsured man in an insured car pulls up to collect us. We get in and whisk away to Malibu. We engage in the correct amount of chat with the uninsured man and then it quiets down as we get onto the 10. I see you looking out the window. I grab your hand and say "I hope your car is OK". And I mean it.

A Camping Story

JAMIE WILBER | VERMONT

Standing at the edge of the lake, I stepped up onto two large rocks hip-distance apart and pulled down my pants. I crouched down, dropping my buttocks as close to the water as I could and began peeing. "HABADAHBADANANANAANANEH!" He sputtered at the sight of me squatting above the water, bare bottom in full view to anyone who might come upon us. Our first backpacking trip together had just gotten a little more intimate.

We were six months in, strolling through REI, picking up all the necessary supplies for our wilderness excursion, when I made my first prediction: *We are going to break up before this trip is over.*

Laying next to each other that first night, I realized I was wrong. Here he was, a man I might one day marry, in this stuffy little tent. He farted and we laughed so hard that I farted too, blaming the chili dinner as we held our noses, gasping for air.

Now, here I was, my pants around my knees, balancing on a rock, stomach aching from laughter and legs shaking, struggling to push the last drops of urine out. "Didn't anybody tell you not to pee so close to a water source?"

"Oops," I said with a smirk, pulling up my pants.

We climbed onto a small boulder, leaving our toes dangling in the cold water, soothing the hotspots of future blisters and set up lunch: almond butter and raspberry jam by the spoonful, trail mix, and an air-sealed packet of shredded salmon with hot sauce. This was our lunch for the last three days minus the rock-hard broken chunks of gluten-free bread he insisted on bringing. Somehow we turned this unintentional toast into a semi-edible breakfast: french toast, lacking the cinnamon, nutmeg, milk, and maple syrup, ultimately made surprisingly delicious chunks of cardboard soaked in powdered eggs and water.

I savored the last spoonful of jam, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and internally noted my remaining hunger. I didn't dare mention it to him, afraid we, but mostly he, might ravenously consume the last few items left in our reserve. Feigning fullness, I began to clean up.

The sound of gently used hiking boots stomping down the trail was soon followed by a young woman, closer to my age than his, emerging from the

woods in a magenta top and tight black pants. "Howdy!" He greeted her. Apparently he was going to try out as many out-of-character greetings as he could think of on this trip.

Earlier that morning we crossed paths with a German thru-hiker.

"Top of thee mornin' to ya!" He called to the lanky blonde man.

"Um, I'm sorry? Vut?" The German stared at him in bewilderment.

"I was just saying hello."

"Oh. Uh, hi." The German hiker awkwardly continued on his way, hiking poles clicking against the rocks with each step.

Now, I stood and watched this waspy woman carry a metal mug to the water's edge. She squatted down, a little too close to my pee spot, flipped her ponytail to one side, and submerged the mug. She lifted the mug and dumped out the contents three times as she told us, "Yeah, I'm hiking with my boyfriend."

"How far you guys going?"

"I guess we're doing the whole thing. I don't know. We'll see. I'm not really a woodsperson."

At this moment it was decided. I was just fine with this person drinking my urine. *Who the fuck was this chick? You've set out to hike 2,200 miles and you don't like the woods? How dare you. Please, just leave right now. Go home. I do not like you. This is the wilderness and You do not belong here.*

"Well, good luck," I told her and watched as she trekked back up the trail to boil her cup of piss water.

I turned to him and whispered, "She's not going to make it."

Cross Country (migration)

KATIE BRIMM | VERMONT

I. California (embers)
sequoias rely on wildfire's
lust devour open tight
cones release
pollen tiny fertile specks that burst
into trees as tall
as the sky

i did not ask for birth
by fire, but I burned anyway
burned open

into fire and flax
not birth, survival
forcibly formed
into a being charred
by her own roots

i leave, drive east, drive
for my life, drive from my life
a phoenix placing faith
in ashes.

II. Carbondale (refuge)
crossing the West
i collect solitude
in slakeless deserts

mountains bring relief
earth's spine still
leaks parched rivers where i catch

breath exhale, stay
just long enough to feel
loss in leaving but leave, east,
anyway.

III. Denver (connection)
when i pick you up you
are already suspended waiting
(always) for me
we drive east through corn
fields and sky

Portuguese blends with Ohio
we see my country this Brasilian and i
for the first time

you've made *pão de queijo*
powdered cheese and tapioca brought
from Brooklyn
fried on a hostel hot plate
5,279 feet above sea level
they're terrible and hard we laugh then ache
for Rio

i've made pie for you
Palisade peaches cut and sugared
with my mother
standing barefoot in her kitchen
last summer

you laugh your hand leaves wheel
finds thigh i ripen
spooning sticky fruit into open
mouth

it is sweet and soft

we wait
for Des Moines.

IV. Des Moines (archives)
one night in Rio you carried
me dressed in
champagne to jump
seven waves for good luck
in the New Year

that was thirteen years ago now
when i refused to kiss you
refused anything except the sheer joy of being
lofted closer to the night closer
to *bossa nova* closer to anything
other than the person i'd have to leave
to become but

this night in Des Moines
we are merely
bodies breaking
you drink my hips
like *cachaça*
slaked by

a calma induzida por tesão.

V. Brooklyn (remembering)
how can you live with such longing
i ask, thousands of miles now
between my loved ones and soon, you

saudades

you say

is the ache that anchors
pulls the past to present makes
us brave enough to love
again.

VI. Vermont (begin again)
green meadow green mind
far from the smoked-out fever i drove
2,998 miles to escape

into fireflies fumbling through dark's delight
migrating monarch wings wash
silt and smoke from my hair
smoothing the ragged edges
of dogeared grief

now i'm a myth remembered
by strangers and stars
gathering grief's petals i bouquet
me into flowers
each fragment forests into green
acorns alone
i am softened

by humus standing
on thousands of years of brown
leaf litter decomposing

back to life.

Silo

TIMOTHY REE | CALIFORNIA

Slip back the barn gone bloody
with the day's dying sun / son be
inside breathing wheat / gnats /
manure / little whiff of gasoline
squeak / squeal of pigs or bats
in the rafters / rapture of wings
meaning judgment for what you
know you did / what you thought
no one saw you thief / you word
hoarder you / three-legged dog
limping out this burning silo / I'm
yelling you a dream yawp of who
we were before the taming saying
this wolf howl means more than
a full red lunar this panting hang
of a tongue doesn't mean we out
of breath doesn't mean we hungry
in heat wet heaving meaning yo
we got this toss the ball flick the
disc we all still alive bet we never
deserved a thing.

The Tree: A Reimagined Fairy Tale

DAN REED | VERMONT

Red was raised on figs and scripture. Every Sunday the quiet gray people of her village shuffled to the little church and listened to the sermon they'd heard every week of their lives; each Sunday was the same as the last. The ancient hunched pastor in his gray robes would hobble to the front of the dusty room and crack open the huge shabby book that had known many hands before his. Then he would read in a voice like brittle rushes passing over a scratched wooden floor:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." And so the first Mother was born in the darkness. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and He divided the light from the darkness. The light he draped upon the first Mother and her quarters. In the darkness he shrouded the animals and the Forest. Soon the first Mother birthed many children in the light, and to them He said, "Eat only the fruit of the fig tree. Of the tree of the Forest you shall not eat, for in that day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Then the book would be closed with a muffled *slam*, and the people would, without prompt, recite their collective canticle:

Not to enter the Forest except on the Path; that is the Law.
Not to eat of the trees of the Forest; that is the Law.
Not to eat of flesh or blood; that is the Law.
Etc. etc.
Amen.

The Mother wrote the Law, and the Pastor enforced it.

This particular day, as it was her 13th birthday, Red would follow the Path for her first time to the Mother's house and bring back the little withered figs that would sustain the town until the next day. The village women had performed this task for as long as there had been a Mother, which was always. Whenever She died, the pastor would choose Her successor. Now, the Mother was Red's grandmother, not that she ever did anything a good grandmother might. She lived many miles from town, on the other side of the Forest, and she never interacted with anyone except the pastor, not even Her own family. She just tended to the figs. It had always been that way.

Before Red left, her birth mother warned her, "Remember to stay on the path. And don't eat anything you find in the forest. And don't go inside the Mother's house without being asked. Here is the basket, remember to fill it with figs from the orchard and carry it back before dark. And here is the club; you know how to use it if you see any wolves. Do you understand me?"

Red nodded vaguely, watching a fly buzzing against the windowpane in a doomed attempt to break through. She put on the red cloak that every town girl received on her 13th birthday, picked up the basket, and left the cottage. The entrance to the Forest was just behind the church. Red had never left town before. She paused in front of the mouth of the Forest and, with a deep breath, plunged into the darkness of the Path.

The quiet of the village gave way to the chirping of crickets, the skittering of small creatures on the branches overhead, and the low whistling of the wind as it rushed through the tops of the trees. It was dark here. Red could hardly see, though the few feeble rays that broke through the canopy made little patches of light along the way.

She trudged on along the Path. It was peaceful amongst the trees. Real peace, nothing like the routine boredom of the village. She had heard many whispered warnings about the Forest, but along the Path, at least, there were beautiful flowers, and it was warm and quiet. Red wondered what might lie in the darkness surrounding her.

Just as this thought passed her mind, Red stopped, her heart thumping in her ears. From just feet away, at ground level, two unblinking yellow eyes stared straight at her.

A wolf.

Overcome with panic, Red fumbled for the club. The wolf stepped into the light, and something about him made her stop. He was sleek, beautiful, nothing like the grizzled beasts that had slunk through all the bedtime stories. His eyes held no threat. Only curiosity.

A few moments passed, but to Red it seemed like a lifetime. Then, slowly, the wolf turned around and padded softly into the darkness. Without thinking, Red dropped her basket, along with the club, and hurried off the Path after the handsome monster.

Not to enter the Forest except on the Path; that is the Law.

The going was difficult and Red couldn't see a thing, but she knew she must follow. The flowers and warmth of the Path gave way to the thorns and chill of the Forest. The thorns tore at her, the red of her blood mingling with the red of her cloak. She licked the wounds on her hands. A few times she lost

her savage guide, but always the yellow eyes would reappear before her, and the pair would continue on through the trees.

After many minutes of this bestial game of follow-the-leader, Red broke through the last veil of thorns and entered a small clearing. Dappled sunlight adorned the ground, and in the center of the clearing stood a gnarled old tree. A river ran just past it, and at the edge of the clearing split into four, each branch flowing into the darkness of the surrounding Forest. The wolf was nowhere to be seen.

Now Red was, by nature, a curious girl, and she knew that there was something in the clearing to be discovered. She walked the perimeter several times, looking. Surely the wolf brought her there for a reason..

When her search along the edge of the clearing proved fruitless, she explored the length of the river within the clearing. She paid special attention to the place where the river split into four, but nothing interesting glinted at her from the riverbed. She sat back on her heels, frustrated.

It was then that she noticed a red glow on the surface of the water. It was a reflection, and she realized that it was coming from the tree.

She looked up.

There, hanging just within reach, was something red. It was round, and hung from a single stem. The rest of the tree was barren, as if it had put all its life into this one product. And it was beautiful.

Red walked over the tree, and reached up towards the apple.

Not to eat of the trees of the Forest; that is the Law.

The words swirled and swelled in her head, but Red wasn't listening. She pulled, and, as the apple parted from the branch, a wolf howled nearby. It sounded joyous, like a welcome.

Not to eat of the trees of the Forest; that is the Law.

The voices in her head rose to a deafening roar. But Red was still a curious girl. There was only one thing left to do. So she raised the apple to her mouth and bit in.

And suddenly all was quiet. The sweet juice exploded in her mouth as the flesh of the apple yielded to her teeth. Pleasure flooded her body. This tasted nothing like the figs that had sustained her for thirteen years.

How could the Law forbid this bliss?

She took another bite, and another. When she had finished the apple she looked up and saw that her guide had returned. She knew that she had to follow him again. Unlacing the tie of the cloak around her neck, she left it under the tree and followed the wolf into the darkness.

But this time she could see perfectly, and her thick coat of fur protected her from the thorns.

The colors of the forest were brighter now, and she could hear every insect rustling in the leaves underfoot. Everything around her had a smell, a taste.

Others joined them as they loped through the trees. Red felt as one with the wolves, with the Forest, with the darkness. She had never felt more alive.

By the time they made it to the Mother's house, the sun was setting and the pack was fifty strong. Her escorts waited at the edge of the trees while Red padded between two rows of fig trees up to the Mother's door.

"What big teeth you have," she heard from behind her.

Red turned to see the Mother picking figs from a tree a few rows down.

"Yes," signed the Mother, "I knew it was only a matter of time before a girl from the village found the Tree." She looked down at Red. "But I never thought it would be my own granddaughter who would give in to the temptation."

At that she reached for a knife in her basket. But Red was too fast.

Not to eat of flesh or blood; that is the Law.

But the Law was dead now.

When she looked up from her kill, Red saw that her companions were all around her. And the trees were no longer heavy with shriveled green figs. No. The setting sun blazed on the glistening skin of a thousand ripe apples.

Closing remarks:

We close this year's Bread Loaf Journal with a reimagined fairy tale, much in the way we have had to shift our romanticization of our idyllic summers in Vermont. The threats to the natural landscape have been omnipresent as we drive past downed trees and must reroute to avoid flooded roads. Among Dan Reed's final words in our collection we encounter the line: "But the law was dead now."

In the aftermath of the floods, the laws that governed us were cast aside. Grounds crew members and other local volunteers worked through the night to evacuate Ripton residents and salvage what they could. We found new routes down the mountain. We were grateful for outlets, hot food, and warm showers.

In what we must increasingly consider part of our digital landscape, our community is also considering the implications of AI and the perceived threats this poses to how we critique and engage with writing. We ask questions about assessment and integrity. We wonder about the future of our field. The flood of information and disruption of our status quo is here.

If the laws of nature and how we engage with writing are dead, what new life will take its place?

The rainbow on our cover reminds us of our commitment to renewal. We will weather the storms because we must. We will recover from the wreckage, we will find our way down the mountain, we will revive literary tradition in whatever forms evolve. We will not forget to stand in awe of rainbows.

Emily Falk, Coeditor